

BENSON & HEDGES

BLUES

BENSON & HEDGES TRADITIONAL BLUES STAGE MEMPHIS IN MAY BEALE STREET MUSIC FESTIVAL

ARTIST BIOS

Following is information on the featured artists performing on the Benson & Hedges Traditional Blues stage at the Memphis in May Beale Street Music Festival, taking place in Tom Lee Park May 1 - 3, 1992.

KOKO TAYLOR

Born and raised on a sharecropper's farm near Memphis, Koko Taylor developed her vocal style from a potent mixture of blues and gospel influences. Her Baptist parents saw blues as "the devil's music," but it was the blues that captured Koko's heart, so she and her brothers would sneak out behind the barn to play. They used homemade instruments, with Koko on vocals.

Koko followed her husband, the late Robert "Pops" Taylor, to Chicago when she was 18 years old. Weekdays, she cleaned houses in the wealthy suburbs north of the Windy City. At night and on the weekends, she would sing the blues in clubs on Chicago's South Side. Soon she was sitting in with greats like Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, Howling Wolf, Junior Wells and Magic Sam.

Her first big national break came when famed songwriter and A&R man Willie Dixon signed Koko to Chess Records. In 1964, Koko recorded "Wang Dang Doodle," which became a million-selling hit. In 1972, after years of singing with Chicago's blues legends, Koko formed her own group, The Blues Machine. She signed with Alligator Records in 1974 where four of her last five works have been Grammy nominated.

JIMMY ROGERS

Jimmy Rogers stands as one of the monumental artistic links between traditional Delta blues and the postwar Chicago style. His work with Muddy Waters in the late 1940's and early 1950's forged the sound that the world would someday come to recognize as Chicago blues.

Jimmy was born in the Delta - Ruleville, Mississippi - in 1924. By 1938, he had made it to Chicago. There he met the original Sonny Boy and John Lee Williamson, among others, and was soon gigging around the city's bustling circuit of neighborhood blues clubs with the likes of Sunnyland Slim and guitarist Claude "Blue Smitty" Smith. In late 1945 Jimmy met Muddy Waters for the first time. It wasn't long before they were hanging out and playing together; American music would never again be the same.

As Jimmy became an integral component of Muddy's bands from 1948 through the mid-50's, Leonard Chess was quick to spot him as an important talent of his own right. "That's All Right" became a hit, and another legendary Chicago blues recording career was under way. But Jimmy Rogers' importance extends beyond the tunes for which he is best known. His compositions, both famous and obscure, are among the most eloquent in the Chicago blues canon.

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JAMES COTTON

James Cotton has been playing the blues nearly all his life. Born in Tunica, Mississippi in 1935, he was fooling around with the harmonica by the time he was five. His mother played a little, making train or hen sounds, and James learned to play by mimicking these sounds. When he heard Sonny Boy Williamson II (Rice Miller) on KFFA's King Biscuit Time, he realized the harmonica was much more than a quaint sound effect device. At the age of nine, Cotton traveled with Sonny Boy for six years, learning the harp and living the life of a traveling bluesman.

He went on to form his own band called James Cotton & His Rhythm Playmates, and caught the attention of Sam Phillips of Sun Records. He recorded two sides for Sun and went on to write and play with the likes of Ike Turner, Howling Wolf and Muddy Waters. Something must have clicked with Cotton and Waters, because they ended up playing together for 12 years.

Cotton has played with a host of contemporary artists including Paul Butterfield, Janis Joplin, Johnny Winter and Steve Miller. He continues to play the blues with a depth of feeling and emotional intensity that is unmatched in the blues world today. During one recent session he blew the top right off his harmonica. "Just getting warmed up," he said.

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